

Papanasam Sivan

Interview by

N.S. RAMACHANDRAN and S. SETHURAMAN

Papanasam Sivan (1890-1973), the celebrated composer of devotional music in Tamil, was elected a Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1962 and was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1972. Among the titles conferred on him are 'Sangita Sahitya Kala Sikhamani' by the Indian Fine Arts Society, Madras (1950); 'Isai Perarignyar' by the Tamil Isai Sangam, Madras (1965); and 'Sangita Kalanidhi' by the Music Academy, Madras (1972). Papanasam Sivan was interviewed in Tamil on behalf of the Sangeet Natak Akademi by N.S. Ramachandran, formerly Chief Producer of Carnatic Music, All India Radio, and S. Sethuraman, journalist and musician, on 30th March 1972 in New Delhi. Following is a presentation of the main points that emerged from the interview. This edited summary has been prepared by G.N.S. Raghavan on the basis of an English translation of the interview by Venkat Swaminathan.—Ed.

N.S. Ramachandran: Sir, you have won fame for your work as a *sahityakarta* (composer) for over fifty years, and you have now been honoured with the award of Padma Bhushan. It is our good fortune to have this opportunity of recording an interview with you on behalf of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Would you kindly recall when and how, and from what guru, you started learning music?

Papanasam Sivan: I never learnt anything formally, either the basic grammar of music or the art of composition. I did not go to any school or *gurukul*. But I learnt Sanskrit, and the Trivandrum College gave me the title of Vidwan and Upadhyaya. When I went to Tamil Nadu, I had no education in Tamil.

It was at Thiruvapur, where I took the name of the Lord and sang *bhajans* during the temple festival days, that for the first time I composed a song, *Unnai Thudhikka Arul Tha, Innisaiyudan Unnai Thudhikka Arul Tha* ('Grant me, Lord, grant that I may celebrate you in sweet music.') I used to sing that composition in my *bhajans* with Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charanams. Some of the great souls of that time heard me singing the song and all of them liked it immensely and blessed me. In particular, Simizhi Sundaram Iyer, that great *vidwan*, was so moved on hearing the song that he embraced me right in the middle of the street, and exclaimed: "A Tamil Tyagayya you are!" Simizhi Sundaram Iyer's musical talent was marvellous. On hearing his music, even an inanimate pillar—let alone me—would be inspired to compose *Sahitya*.

There was another Himalayan figure in those days, Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer. Music would flow out of him like the torrential summer rain. I heard him and I felt: 'Well, this is true music. This is the music that I should be hearing all the time.' I began to learn from him. For about eight years I followed

him wherever he went, and listened to about fifty concerts of his. It was from this constant hearing that I acquired knowledge of the fundamentals of music.

I believe there cannot be any music beyond that. A pair of ears that heard Konerirajapuram's divine music would not acknowledge anything else as music. He could not sing at a pitch less than 4 1/2 *kattai*. The weight and majesty of that tone, I have not heard from anyone else. He took me close to him and said: 'My dear boy, be with me. Music will come to you on its own. You don't have to do anything.' He travelled the whole breadth and length, right from Kanyakumari and Harikesanallur in the south to Madras in the north, wherever concert engagements took him. It is enough to have attended just four of his concerts to know all about music. But I had the good fortune of hearing fifty concerts of that great artist.¹ Just imagine: could there be anyone more fortunate than me?

Ramachandran: It would be very difficult to find anyone today who has heard the music of Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer. But the impact of his music is there in you. It is there in your compositions. Now, sir, among your compositions, how many are set to *sampoorna* ragas and how many are in other ragas?

Sivan: About fifty Keertanas are in *melakarta* ragas. Most of them are in *irandu kalai chavukkam* (slow tempo), and the rest are in *madhyama kala*. They are all composed in Tamil.

Ramachandran: And how many of the *janya* ragas have you handled?

Sivan: Maybe around twenty. Whatever be the raga, I have had to strive a good deal to capture the true form of a raga, to beautify the raga without distorting its structure, to innovate and embellish without violating the original form.

Ramachandran: But there is not a trace of that strain of creation when we hear your songs that are so full of raga *bhava*.

Sethuraman: I would like to ask a question. What guidelines would you suggest to vocalists who want to sing your compositions?

Sivan: Well, they should look at it this way: 'Here is a fellow who has taken some pains to compose these Sahityas. He is very much alive and he is amidst us. For good or bad, rightly or wrongly, he has also chosen to sing. So, why not go and meet him when he is singing his own compositions, if we intend to choose them for our concerts? Why not pay him a visit and ask him to sing for us, more than once?' If they don't entertain such an attitude, even if they are great musicians their handling of these songs will not convey the true flavour of my compositions, the true meaning, the spirit of *bhakti*. There won't be a trace of these. This is what I have been saying repeatedly.

Impelled by a desire that there should be an opportunity for anyone who is desirous of learning my compositions, I began to set apart two morning hours from

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Following are extracts from the entries on Papanasam Sivan in the biographical dictionary of Carnatic composers and musicians prepared by N. Rajagopalan in two volumes: 'A Garland', published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, in 1990; and 'Another Garland', published by Carnatic Classics, Madras, in 1992.

He was born at Polagam in Nannilam taluk but lived later at Papanasam. His name was Ramayya and 'Sivan' was used in token of his devotion. Son of Ramamritham Ayyar and Yogambal, Ramayya lost his father while young and went to Trivandrum poor in means. The Maharajah's 'oottupura' (royal free kitchen) came to his help as it did to many others like Parur Sundaram Ayyar. He derived inspiration from the songs of Nilakanta Sivan.

The songs of Papanasam Sivan are pregnant with devotion and offer ample scope to bring out raga bhava. The language is straight and simple and its appeal direct to the heart. The style is easy and easy-paced as in the case of Tyagaraja. He composed over two thousand songs and adopted over seventy-five ragas. Mostly they were in Tamil, with about fifty in Sanskrit. His signature is 'Ramadasa'. The range of compositions comprised Viruthams, Darus, Padas, Kirtanas, Nondi Sindhus, Tirupugazh, Tillanas and Mangalam. The themes are mostly devotional, with some on Bharathiar, Annie Besant, etc.

His simple yet crisp songs for films brought him fame. He himself took the lead roles in 'Thyagabhoomi', 'Bhakta Chetha', 'Kubera Kuchela' and 'Kuchela'. He was perhaps the one man born for the roles he played in the first and the last. He was a playback singer too. Simple, soft-spoken, amiable and scholarly, Sivan's qualities of head and heart made Dr. Rukmini Arundale take him to Kalakshetra. A host of prominent musicians learnt his songs from him direct. Papanasam Sivan was without doubt the architect of renaissance in Tamil music in the twentieth century.

He had at one time signed contracts for not less than seventy-two pictures, involving monetary returns of sumptuous sums. Said Rangaramanuja Ayyangar in 1972: "He had tasted the sweets of adversity and had realised the benefits of plain living and high thinking. He was now sucked into a world where he felt entirely out of tune. Ere long, wealth began to cloy. The Lord and his angels pulled him out of the morass and he became the old Bhakta again. He spent all his earnings on renovating the temple and tank at Polagam and became Kuchela again."

7 o'clock till 9 o'clock. Whoever came to me, I sang for him and taught him. I did this for some time, and I was doing it as if I was running a school. One of those who learnt my songs in this way was Madurai Mani. There were quite a few other vocalists also who learnt from me. They repeatedly heard me singing my compositions. They too used to sing. It is through this constant practice of singing my compositions right under my personal attention that they have learnt them well and are doing justice to them. Those who have heard these vocalists will testify how beautifully they sing my compositions. And their singing has in turn added lustre to my songs.

Ramachandran: You have put it very well. One should learn under a guru, and from the person of the composer directly when that is possible. Only then, the true spirit and meaning of the Sahitya will be realised. The singer will be infused with the *bhava* of the composition and will be able to convey it to the audience.

Sivan: When one starts singing with inadequate understanding, then the music suffers. There are so many pitfalls. When I heard some of them sing my compositions, I used to bewail the fate that had befallen me: 'O Lord, are my songs, composed with so much of feeling, destined to suffer such torture at the hands of these people?'

There are those who say: 'Here is a man who knows nothing of the basics of versification, *edugai* and *monai*,² and he comes out claiming to be a composer.' Sure, I know little of *edugai* and *monai*. I know no grammar. But I know by ear a hundred songs of Thayumanavar, the songs of Thiruneelakanta Dasar, the Keertanas of Thiagaraja Swamigal. I have immersed myself, with devotion, in the compositions of such great men. That has given me some idea of Sahitya and on the strength of that I have striven to compose my songs. Surely, it is a gift to me by goddess Ambal and a gift to me by Lord Sarveswara. Besides that, I too have put in a lot of effort.

Ramachandran: What do you think of the criticism that there are Sanskrit words sprinkled in your Tamil compositions?

Sivan: In the Sanskrit language, there are letters denoting different sounds which belong to *Ka-vargam*, *Sa-vargam*, etc. Those who have no idea of how to pronounce the letters, start criticising me for mixing Sanskrit words. They even refuse to acknowledge my songs as Tamil compositions. That makes me begin to doubt if they have sensitive feelings, if they have something called heart. What is Tamil? What is Sanskrit? Both these languages have struck deep roots in our country. Even if those of other areas give up Sanskrit, Tamils cannot give it up. All the Pūranas, Shāstras, all the philosophic treatises and grammatical works are in Sanskrit. I can only feel sorry for those who do not realise this.

Ramachandran: It is a matter of great pleasure that the Tamil Isai Sangam has honoured you with the title, 'Tamil Isai Per Arignyar'. And yet there is a segment which clamours for Pure Tamil or Untainted Tamil. As you said, they are an ignorant lot. Take Thirukural. Take even the Sangam works. In all of them you



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find Sanskrit terms in abundance. Sanskrit and Tamil have grown together in this country.

Sivan: The present Government in Tamilnadu have committed one great lapse. They have consigned Sanskrit and Sanskrit culture to a deep burial. They do not want to have anything to do with them. This is not love for a language. It is language fanaticism. That is what I believe.

Ramachandran: We can never sever the ties between Tamil and Sanskrit. There is Sanskrit in Telugu Sahityas; there is Sanskrit in Kannada Sahityas. So is the case in the Malayalam Sahityas. And it is so in the Tamil literary texts from ancient times.

Sivan: It is named *maruvu*. It is also called *sidaivu*. You will find Sanskrit words in thousands. They grant them as *maruvu* or *sidaivu*. This has been there right from olden times. Sanskrit never tried to banish Tamil. And Tamil did not hate Sanskrit either. Sanskrit is spread in all countries; it is there throughout the world.

Ramachandran: Right now, here in Delhi, there is a World Sanskrit Conference being held. But in a corner of the country there is a protest against it, of recent birth. It cannot last long. I am sure we will see better times. Sanskrit will prosper and so will Tamil. You have shown us the way to that kind of future. Just as music and Sahitya are fused in your compositions, so are Tamil and Sanskrit fused, like pearls and corals strung together in an ornament.

Sivan: I feel that, as you have suggested, good times are ahead.

Ramachandran: Based on Carnatic ragas, you have composed many delectable songs for films: for example *Radhe Unakku Kobam Ahadedi* ('Radha, it does not become you to be thus cross with me'), which was sung by M.K. Thiagaraja Bhagavathar. It captured the hearts of millions of ordinary people. The song belongs, they say, to the category of 'light classical'. Nowadays, however, this kind of music, the light classical variety, has strayed far away from the raga base. Can this trend be reversed? There is another matter which I would like to raise. In music concerts these days, all attention is focussed on Swara rendering and raga elaboration. The listeners look forward to these elements only. They applaud hugely when they get them. In this melee, how can *rasa anubhava* be realised? If a music concert turns into such an uproarious event, can the singer succeed in communicating the *rasa* of your compositions?

Sivan: This trend will reverse. It has to: it cannot go further because there is no place to go.

Sethuraman: In music concerts, how much attention should we devote to Sahitya? In what measure should technical aspects like Pallavi, Niraval, Swaram etc. be given importance, in themselves and in relation to each other? What are your views regarding this?

Sivan: We want to drink juice, don't we? There is the jack fruit: you have first to remove the thick thorny outer skin; then there is the pulp segment; you have to extricate it and again peel off its thin covering. You have to take all this trouble. But Thiagaraja Swamigal has given you the inner juicy core, ready. When you have that in such abundance, why go in for grammar and show off your knowledge of it at such length? I do not know how wise it is to dwell so much, and for so long, on that aspect.

Sethuraman: What would you suggest, from your long experience, for the improvement and progress of the Carnatic music scene?

Sivan: First, one should acquire the knowledge of Swaras. If you study, you get it. Knowledge of languages is also very necessary. Tamil and Telugu one should know. Thiagaraja's Keertanas have become part of our everyday experience. It will be to the good of the musicians and of the country, and above all to the good of music, to learn to sing his Kritis in clear diction. If this is not done, I am afraid everything will turn sickly.

Ramachandran: The practice of printing and publishing compositions with Swaras in a notation system has come into vogue. How far will this be helpful?

Sivan: Both text and notation are very necessary. If you don't give the notation the form will be lost. As for the words, do you know what has happened to some of my Sahityas? There is the composition in Kalyani raga, 'Chidambaram Enru...' Now, it has been mutilated and is sung as 'Chidambaram Ennai...' When compositions get mangled, and something entirely out of place and bereft of meaning creeps in, how can music flourish? To guard against such distortions, the compositions must be published along with the Swara notation. Only then will the *sahityakarta* have peace of heart.

Ramachandran: We are very grateful to you for giving us the benefit of your views. They will be found most useful. It is our good fortune that you have graced us with your presence here.

Sivan: The pleasure is equally mine. I have spoken whatever came to my mind.

Ramachandran: We thank you on behalf of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. □

NOTES

1. Of interest in this connection is the following comment by Dr. S. Pinakapani (in the course of a letter to G.N.S. Raghavan): "Sivan was to Konerirajapuram Vaitha (as he was called) what Anjaneya was to Sri Rama. Sivan would move along with Vaitha from *kacheri* to *kacheri* absorbing what all he could from the great man's style of singing. Vaitha, in his turn, would listen to Sivan to get inspiration before his concerts. R. Rangaramanuja Ayyangar used to tell me that every breath of Sivan's music reminded him of Konerirajapuram Vaitha."
2. Rhyme, at the beginning or end of a line.